

Now, after several hours editing the material, I am less hopeful about the prospect for this transcription process than I was immediately after looking at the India transcripts. While we all thought that it is a purely menial task, what I am gathering is that transcription is actually a much more interpretive process than we had imagined, and that if someone doesn't already grasp the thrust of your argument, and what you are trying to say, the transcription is likely to come out garbled. It's not just a matter of listening more carefully. The person actually has to decide how to indicate interjections, pauses, and sub-clauses with dashes and commas, and those interpretations often depend to a large degree on being cognizant of what the speaker is trying to say, from the whole context of what has already been said.

Example 1

Raw transcription:

[1:36:52]

"I am circling around you might say and moving in on one very central theme that I wrote off my book which is that Americans have to come to understand that we not only have a leadership position in the world which makes such that it changes to come it can come sufficiently without our not only participating but leading it."

This sentence, as transcribed, is incomprehensible to me—I can't edit it into something meaningful because I don't know what it is trying to say. Clearly, you didn't speak in gibberish, so I went back to listen to what you said.

It turns out that the transcription was not very good. A better literal transcription—without editing, just to capture what you were saying as closely as possible—would be:

"I am circling around, you might say, and moving in on one very central theme that I'll—of my book, which is that Americans have to come to understand that we not only have a leadership position in the world, which makes it such that if change is to come, it can't come sufficiently without our not only participating but leading it."

There are two major errors in the transcription (not to mention adding the words "I wrote," which you didn't say, or the lack of putting in dashes, which makes the transcription much more difficult to decipher.)

The two errors are transcribing "if change is to come" as "it changes to come," and transcribing "it can't come sufficiently" as "it can come sufficiently." These are very minor mistakes phonetically, but these minor phonetic mistakes, on their own, and in combination, have the effect of making the sentence incomprehensible, so they are actually major mistakes in terms of meaning.

One could say to the transcriptionist, "listen more carefully," but I think the problem runs deeper than that. If you listen to the recording, the words do sound very much like "it

changes to come” and “it can come sufficiently”—they sound that way at least as much as they sound like the words you actually spoke. In fact, in the first case, the recording sounds more like the way it was transcribed than the way you actually spoke it. The transcriptionist doesn’t have “bad ears.”

How, then, do I know what you actually spoke? Because I recognized the sentence as incomprehensible, so I went back and inferred what you must have been saying from the context of the sentence. And here is the crucial point: I wouldn’t have even been aware that I needed to go back and do that, unless I was paying attention to whether the sentences made sense or not.

It doesn’t seem to me that these transcriptionists are doing that. We could ask them to do it. It seems to me that having them pay attention to whether each sentence makes sense or not, and then rewinding and interpreting if it doesn’t—rather than just merrily typing down whatever the transcriptionist hears, whether it makes sense or not—would add at least double the time.

Yet, even if they tried to do that, I am not confident that it would come out more accurately. For often deciphering the meaning of the sentence requires familiarity with your overall argument and point of view.

Take, for example, this raw transcription:

Example 2

[0:19:15]

“However, it is my believe that the many kinds of actions that need to be taken and changes that need to be made are made more likely if very generally, we in America and we as humans come to understand ourselves in a very broad sense, not just in a sense confined to any one nation, in a different way and a more realistic way than we have ever achieved, and that we should change our understanding and the way certain somehow that now appear extremely surprising and incomprehensible are understood in a way that makes them less surprising and I see that as a necessary step on the way to making them less frequent and even elimination certain kinds of phenomena, making quite radical changes, but I think that depends on understanding what has to be changed and who has to be changed and by who and how and I don't think there is... I think I can contribute to that, that's what I propose to do here.”

Here, I am pretty much able to understand what you are saying without referring to the audio. Yet, the sentence is so convoluted, as transcribed, that it is almost useless for our purposes. Reading this kind of transcription raw, for any more than half a page or so, becomes impossible. So it needs to be edited to have any value to us.

So, I was able to edit it into pretty readable form, without referring to the recording:

“However, it is my believe that the many kinds of actions that need to be taken, and changes that need to be made, are more likely to occur if very generally, we in America and we as humans come to understand ourselves in a very broad sense, not just in a sense confined to any one nation—in a different way, and a more realistic way, than we have ever achieved. We should change our understanding of ourselves so that events that now appear extremely surprising and incomprehensible are understood in a way that makes them less surprising.”

“I see that as a necessary step on the way to making them less frequent, and even eliminating these kinds of events, like genocide and massacre. I think I can contribute to that understanding, and that's what I propose to do here.”